



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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A Culture of Caring

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How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?... And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you (1 Thessalonians 3:9,12).

Love, gratitude, and joy stake out the place where a Christian heart lives. It's no surprise, then, that we should be feeling all those things deeply today as we celebrate and give thanks for Tammy Yeager's ministry among us.

Ten years ago I was told there was someone I should meet—a woman graduating from seminary who might have something to offer around here. At the time, Westminster was in the midst of a lot of transitions, and while I was just feeling my way into the community I was happy to meet anyone who might be able to help. So Tammy and I met at Bruegger's Bagels, which is as good a place as any to begin a potential recruiting process.

I remember a kind face, a gentle spirit, a quick mind, and a warm laugh, in spite of a little nervousness. There was an openness to discerning where God wanted her to serve, though this whole notion of going into ministry clearly seemed to be much more God's idea than hers. Tammy told me she started taking courses at Pittsburgh Seminary years ago mainly because she wanted to learn more, and definitely not because she saw herself as a pastor in a congregation. That kind of "Who, me?" response to a call from God put Tammy squarely in the middle of a long and familiar biblical tradition. Moses and Jeremiah, to name just a couple of conspicuous examples, insisted that God must have gotten a wrong number when the call first came to them.

To this day, I tell seminary students and prospective elders and deacons that a healthy sense of incompetence is actually a prerequisite for the job. Who among us, after all, is competent to serve in the name of God, unless God gives us the gifts to do that? And chief among those gifts are courage enough to go where God calls and a deep enough sense of humility to drive you always to rely on the presence and power of God. In fact, as St. Paul says—a reluctant recruit to Christian ministry if there ever was one—it’s precisely in our own weakness that we discover the strength of God. But then we learn that God’s strength moving through us is more than enough for whatever God calls us to do.

A few months went by, and we formed an Associate Pastor Nominating Committee, and Tammy was encouraged to let herself be considered for our position in pastoral care. Now a good candidate is likely to be wanted by other people too. Sociologists call that “triangulated desire.” It means that if you want someone who really is desirable, you’ll probably have to compete and work hard to get her—a principle that applies in all sorts of contexts, as any young person in love already knows. When Tammy rose to the top of our candidate list, I had more than one conversation with her, trying to point out all the ways in which, attractive as a hospital chaplaincy might be, life at Westminster could offer so many more opportunities to care for people in a variety of ways.

We’re all so grateful now, nine years later, that things turned out the way they did. In fact, Tammy’s early experience in hospital chaplaincy has been a great gift to many people here at Westminster—which, by the way, is another example of how, in the providence of God, nothing is lost and no experience is ever wasted in the end. Every opportunity that comes our way, and everything that

happens to us in fact, is either a gift from God to be used for God's own purposes or a challenge to be overcome and ultimately redeemed by the grace of God.

In the end, we called Tammy to do two things at Westminster, besides leading in worship and a few other tasks that ministers routinely do. The first was to provide pastoral care directly to members and friends of the congregation, and the second was to help us develop a genuine culture of caring in and through the congregation.

Deacons and Stephen ministers, together with other pastors, had already been looking after individuals for a long time, of course, but we had a sense that many people were reluctant to acknowledge their own need of care. For decades there have been some counselors' offices on top of the hill near Ft. Couch Road, and more than once over the years I've heard some of them say that they look out their windows across the valley below, and they know how many people in those well-kept communities are hurting and facing some of the same kinds of struggles that people everywhere have to face. Sometimes a sense of keeping up appearances gets in the way of acknowledging our need to rely on one another for support and encouragement. So we wanted to create a culture of caring in more pervasive and practical ways at Westminster, and we put Tammy in charge of doing that.

Today the church's caring ministry is vastly stronger than it was nine years ago—both in our willingness to acknowledge our personal needs and in our readiness to care for others in all kinds of ways. We describe Westminster on our website and in our literature as “a caring community,” but we have to live into the words we use. It's easy to make all sorts of promising pronouncements. People

do that all the time. What's hard is living into the reality, walking the walk besides talking the talk. We really try to do that here, and Tammy and so many of you have been at the center of making our culture of caring a reality. And it shows. When new members join the church they often say that one of the things that drew them here was the sense that people really do care for one another.

This culture of caring is not just about what goes on inside the congregation. It's also about reaching out beyond the church to the world around us. There's a pretty good case to be made that human beings evolved to look out for one another within their own family and some fairly small tribe, but also to be indifferent or even hostile to people outside the tribe. That may be part of our natural tendency, but as C. S. Lewis said, humans are amphibians, part nature and part spirit, and our salvation includes growing more and more into the spiritual side, and learning to guide our natural selves in light of the spiritual.

So Paul tells the Thessalonians, "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you." Christian love knows no boundaries, just as those pictures of earth from space show no boundaries of nation or race or tribe. God's love in Jesus Christ is for everyone, and so is the love of those who follow Jesus.

The thing about a culture is, it's much bigger than any individual within it. It lives on and grows while its members come and go. A culture is shaped by its people, and especially its leaders, but the greatest contribution anyone can make to a culture is to strengthen it in ways that continue to thrive long after the individual is gone. Tammy has been a great gift to Westminster, not only by providing

such good care to so many individuals directly, but also by helping to create a culture where one of our central values is caring for one another and for all people.

We had a staff luncheon in honor of Tammy the other day. It was a good though bittersweet time, as you might imagine, with a great deal of affection around the big horseshoe table. I asked whether anyone had any Tammy stories to share, and after a typically brief moment of awkward silence one person said, “I have a Tammy story.” The gist of it was that she had been to a funeral Tammy conducted recently, and it was very moving and even beautiful, as funerals can be sometimes. Afterwards, someone sitting nearby said, “Listening to Tammy makes me want to die.” We all laughed and asked, “Was that a good Tammy story or a bad Tammy story?”

It was a good story, of course. Tammy has done lots of funerals here. That comes with being in charge of pastoral care. You hear people’s news from the doctor, and visit with them in the hospital, and pray for healing, and celebrate when the healing comes here and now. And then there comes a time when the healing happens only in heaven, and so we gather to celebrate a life, and claim the promises of the gospel, and remind ourselves that all our hope and all our joy lie ultimately in the goodness and grace of God.

Everyone dies sooner or later. Not to acknowledge that is to try to hide from a central fact of life. But our faith tells us that death is not the last word, and believing that truth becomes one of our greatest sources of courage and strength and peace. Christ has been raised, says Paul, who met the risen Lord himself. And because Jesus lives, we too can live, so that to live is Christ and to die is ultimately nothing but a tremendous gain.

Those who are left behind, of course, experience a great sense of loss. So the pastor and congregation gather around and support us, and remind us of the communion of saints, not only by sharing the promises of God but also by being present with us. That's just what a caring community does. And the loss, difficult and painful as it is, turns out to be only temporary in the end. "This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure," Paul says, "because we look at things that cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary but what cannot be seen is eternal."

And Jesus himself says that too. Shortly before he dies, he tells his disciples that he's about to leave them, and "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward." Separation of any kind is difficult, and the more we love someone the harder it is. But people of faith find God most deeply when we know we need God the most. No matter what else may change in our lives, God never changes. God is always present with us for guidance, comfort, and strength.

Tammy and I have talked a lot about this over the years. Ministry is hard work, especially when you care so much about the people. Those who say they wish they had a job that's only one hour a week are missing some of the details. To share people's burdens, to pray with and for them, and finally to give thanks for a life that's ended here, in such a way that those who remain find comfort and peace and might even look forward to the time when they will go where Jesus and their loved ones have already gone—all of that takes an enormous amount of energy and love. But it's also a tremendous gift, not only to those who receive the care but to anyone who is called to be an instrument of God's own caring.

For those who are called to ministry, it's a great blessing to share with people so deeply and meaningfully for a time. But then, as Ecclesiastes reminds us, "For everything there is a season." There is a time to labor and a time to rest, a time to be present and a time to move on. All of those times are God's times, and God is present in them all.

When the time comes to move on, it's part of the minister's calling to entrust the congregation's care to other ministers—not because you don't love the people anymore, but precisely because you continue to care for them. Naturally, when a good pastor leaves people want her to come back for some of the most important events in their lives: baptizing children, marrying daughters or sons, conducting funerals for people they love. It's perfectly natural to want the minister you know to share in those things; but a faithful minister understands that it's good for people to get to know another pastor who will be there for them in ways that the one who moves on no longer can. To pray people through that transition is one of the last great gifts a pastor can give to her congregation.

Hard as it is to remember now, there was a time, a decade ago, when most of us did not know Tammy. Since then, we've all come to know and love her, and we're so grateful for the gifts she's brought us, and the gift she has been to each of us. Now it's time to return her to her own family, and all the joy and care that come with a whole new generation of little ones to look after. And it's time to pray that God will bring us another pastor, whom we may not know yet, but God knows, and we will also grow to know and love.

So we come full circle to where we began this morning, in love and gratitude and joy. And we close for now

by celebrating Tammy's new calling, while we leave her with those biblical words that reflect so well our love and appreciation: "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?"



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